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ABSTRACT

Adopting a wellness program for school personnel can reduce health insurance costs, workman's compensation insurance costs, absenteeism, and staff turnover while improving productivity and morale. Wellness programs focus on improving health and reducing the risk and impact of disease rather than on curing illnesses already contracted. Successful staff wellnes programs make participants responsible, raise nutritional awareness, teach stress management, encourage physical fitness, and increase environmental sensitivity. Implementation of wellness programs requires altering organizational conceptions of health. Administrative commitment and support must be obtained, employees should be recruited as leaders, good management practices recognizing employee value should be instituted, support groups can be created, participants should be helped to set realizable personal goals, and employee incentives can be developed. Community resources that can be tapped to enhance the program include the school's own facilities and nutritional staff, public and nonprofit agencies, and insurance carriers and associations. Additional program development suggestions include conducting an organizational assessment, creating a plan, identifying program components, disseminating information, involving families, and avoiding programs not proven through research. (PGD)

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Updating SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES

Volume 17/Number 5/May 1986

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Is preventable disease exacting a toll among your school system's employees? According to Mark J. Tager, M.D., writing in *The School Administrator*, "chances are your school district is not unlike the national average: one in six of your employees has hypertension; one in ten has problems with alcohol or drugs; half are obese; almost a quarter of your male employees will die of cardiovascular disease before age 65."

These alarming figures are indicators of the lack of wellness among school employees that may be affecting costs in your school system. Among the areas affected are:

- *Health insurance costs.* Several factors point toward continued escalation of health care costs at rates higher than general inflation.
- *Workman's compensation insurance costs.* On-the-job injuries not only result in costly insurance claims, but also cause a loss of productivity and personnel and administrative problems.
- *Absenteeism.* The direct cost of substitute teachers and the indirect cost of lost production can be substantial. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, chances are better than eight in ten that from one to fourteen teachers will be absent at any one school on any given day.
- *Staff turnover.* The costs of locating, hiring, and training quality employees are mounting. The untimely death, disability, and early retirement of valued employees can result in substantial costs.

In addition to the financial costs of a lack of wellness among employees, there are human and educational losses to consider. Staff wellness programs offer school systems the opportunity to reduce costs while also increasing staff productivity and morale. Reduced absenteeism among teachers, which results in fewer substitutes in classrooms, is linked to more student time on task and increased learning. Also remember that school employees are role models for children; improving employee health habits will have a built-in multiplier effect as it influences young people.

Importance of wellness

When you make a commitment to wellness, you accept a philosophical approach to health care that is quite different from the one that has prevailed historically in the United States. The approach involves a holistic view of health that recognizes the interrelationship of physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

Traditional medical practitioners concentrate on symptoms; the result is a growing emphasis on high-technology diagnosis and treatment of medical disorders. This approach leads people to believe that a lack of symptoms of disease is an indicator of good health and that intervention is necessary only when signs, symptoms, or disability associated with disease appear.

In contrast, the concept of wellness assumes that individuals can achieve and maintain higher levels of wellness that go beyond the mere absence of disease. This new higher level of wellness attained through education, growth, and self-actualization will result in a more productive person, both at and away from the work place.

Wellness then focuses on disease prevention and developing human potential rather than on curative medicine. This shift in emphasis is a necessary response to an alarming trend in disease that has appeared in this century. From the point of view of life expectancy, people are living longer. But a comparison of the leading causes of death in 1900 and 1976 reveals a marked shift away from contagious diseases toward what are referred to generically as hypokinetic or lifestyle diseases such as heart disease. The causes of many of these diseases can be controlled by most people.

It is therefore beneficial when people are aware of the impact of their environment and lifestyle on their health. Staff wellness programs are proving to be effective vehicles for developing this awareness.

Keys to success

Most successful staff wellness programs have five elements in common. The first is *self-responsibility*. By focusing on the individual, wellness programs raise the awareness level of participants, respect personal choice, and allow change to be self-directed.

Second, a complete program includes a *nutritional awareness* component that gives employees the opportunity to learn about the options available for a healthier diet.

Attention to *stress management* is the third key element. Stress is becoming pandemic in our society. But employees who engage in stress-relieving activities

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and management techniques can take actions to reduce job-related stress and assist employees in coping with stress.

Fourth, *physical fitness* activities are based on positive growth and fun, not competition or scare tactics.

The fifth element is a program component designed to promote *environmental sensitivity*. As a result of learning about the impact of environmental and social factors on personal health, employees can plan lifestyle changes that will be conducive to higher levels of wellness.

School board commitment

Before your school board attempts to implement a staff wellness program, you must begin to treat health as an organizational as well as an individual concern. According to Dr. Robert Allen, president of the Human Resources Institute, "The chief reason for the failure of business health programs appears to be that the organizational culture, filled with negative health norms, overrides whatever changes the individuals try to make."

This point is particularly linked to management. A cultural approach to the well-being of staff emphasizes the replacement of blame-placing and win-lose power struggles with positive reinforcement. People at all levels of the school system must work together to develop and encourage positive group health norms and working relationships that emphasize positive rather than stressful interpersonal relationships.

The board also must address the need for a policy statement committing the school system to the wellness program. Such a statement is an excellent way for the board to reaffirm its commitment to its employees and the value they represent to the system as human resources.

In addition, the board must ensure that staff wellness efforts are consistent with the board's mission statement. Staff wellness efforts do not yield short-term results; they are an investment in staff potential and cost containment that will be realized in the long run. As such, they must be made an integral part of the strategic plans for the school system as expressed in the school board's mission statement and long-range goals.

Some things to do

Once board commitment and long-range goals for staff wellness are established, several other important program components must be brought into place.

Administrative commitment and support. If a program does not have the support of the formal and informal organizational leaders, there is little chance it will succeed. Administrators should be encouraged to become role models to demonstrate the system's commitment.

Employee leadership role. When employees from all school system levels take personal responsibility for parts of the program, commitment to the program is built. Involving employees as leaders also takes advantage of the wealth of expertise that exists among employees in most school systems.

Integration with good management. The best designed wellness program has little chance of success if employees don't feel valued and respected. Wellness activities should dovetail with ongoing efforts to manage people more effectively. Attention to good management skills, such as effective goal setting, praise for a job well done, effective time management, and timely communications, will complement the health promotion activities.

Support groups. Cultural norms often encourage poor health habits. For individuals to succeed in breaking with these norms they need the enouragement and reinforcement of support groups. At the work site these groups act as valuable buffers against existing cultural norms and the deleterious effects of stress. Support groups built around a single wellness issue, such as smoking cessation, help maintain an individual's efforts when initial motivation starts to wane.

Personal goal setting. While the emphasis of the program must be on changing cultural norms, individuals should set goals for their participation in the program. The focus will be on results rather than on activities. The person who sets realizable goals and is able to attain them within a positive support structure will more likely continue the new health practice even if the initiating activity ceases.

Employee incentives. Modest incentives should be provided for progam participants. These may include items such as I.D. cards, T-shirts, discount coupons, certificates, and special awards. Keeping track of results is essential to the success of the program and individual participants. An incentive program provides an excellent vehicle for keeping records of accomplishments. Another incentive for involvement not to be overlooked is charging participants a modest fee for activities. This revenue offsets some program costs, but also demonstrates a commitment by the participant to stick with it.

Community resources

School systems possess a unique set of resources that make implementation of a wellness program much easier and less expensive than in many businesses. Schools have existing facilities (gymnasiums, swimming pools, home economics laboratories, team sports areas) that must be built or rented by private businesses conducting wellness programs. These facilities represent a substantial investment, but many school systems don't fully use them.

In addition, most school systems have staff trained in health, nutrition, and recreation who can serve as program advisers, advocates, and teachers, as well as a nucleus of willing volunteers who already are involved in healthful activities.

Another resource readily available to most school systems is a network of community contacts and support agencies. As a result, you won't have to go it alone. Agencies such as the public health department, recreation department, extension service, YMCA/YWCA, and local branches of health associations frequently will provide planning assistance as well as materials and instructors. Also, the school board's insurance carrier and insurance industry associations, such as the Health Insurance

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Association of America and the American Council of Life Insurance, can be valuable sources of guidance and materials. Some insurance carriers offer discounts or rebates on health insurance premiums when wellness programs are provided.

In addition, involve your professional staff members who are trained in program design. With encouragement from the board, existing personnel frequently can plan and coordinate the program and the develop instructional and promotional materials.

Prescribe wellness

Consider following these nine suggestions to get your wellness program started. They are compiled from the experience of school systems and other organizations that have had success with such programs.

1. *Conduct an organizational assessment.* Begin your efforts with facts. Assess the current health habits of your staff and the school system's health norms. This will be a valuable first step as you plan your activities and it also will provide baseline data for program evaluation.

2. *Create a wellness action plan.* Start with a board-approved philosophy and a goals statement that express your commitment to the program and provide direction for the planning staff. Samples of the types of goals a board may wish to adopt include:

- Promote a sense of unity among all school system employees;
- Provide positive organizational and community support for good health practices;
- Provide all employees with the opportunity to develop and implement a personalized wellness plan.

3. *Identify program components.* Don't try to do everything right away. Start with a few programs that your needs assessment indicates will be well received by your staff and nurture growth from those. When considering your options, keep in mind activities or programs that have been successful in other organizations (see box). Whenever possible, offer programs during working hours at each work site. This process works particularly well with health screenings and introductory programs. Staff development and inservice days also are excellent opportunities to introduce your staff to wellness activities.

4. *Use community resources.* You don't have to reinvent the wheel or incur unnecessary costs. Use community resources whenever possible. Such organizations as the American Heart Association, American Diabetes Association, and the American Lung Association often are willing to provide publications, promotional materials, health screenings, and instructors.

5. *Emphasize the team leader role.* Recruit and train a team leader for each work site to promote staff involvement and build a support network for new participants. Team leaders can conduct orientation sessions, distribute literature, sign up participants, and help maintain enthusiasm. They provide an essential "personal touch."

6. *Disseminate information.* It will be essential to raise the health awareness level of many of your employees; persistent myths about health will have to be dispelled. Use every medium available to introduce personnel to your program, including:

- posters and literature;
- resource handbook;
- wellness seminars;
- lending library of health-related materials;
- wellness fair
- "fun runs" and other sports events (with the emphasis on fun, not competition).

7. *Provide employee incentives.* The goal of a wellness program is to develop employees whose wellness efforts become self-sufficient. As this occurs, individuals will find that the enjoyment of participation and the higher level of wellness gained provide sufficient reward for their efforts. Your incentive program should emphasize getting people started and provide recognition for displays of commitment.

Some wellness program ideas

- Medical screening (blood pressure, cancer, diabetes)
- Fitness assessment
- Stress management
- Personalized fitness programs
- Weight control
- CPR/emergency first aid training
- Exercise classes
- Nutrition awareness
- Communication skills
- Outdoor education/recreation
- Family recreation program
- Accident prevention/safety program
- Smoking cessation program
- Parenting classes
- Alcohol/drug abuse program

8. *Involve families.* The benefits of family participation will be reflected in the improved health of family members and the reduced cost of dependent health care. Family participation also promotes a supportive home culture for employees who are attempting to make health and fitness improvements.

9. *Stay with research-based programs.* Although transcendental meditation may sound tempting to a staff member, stick to the proven programs. Research substantiates the health benefits of programs such as smoking cessation, physical fitness, alcohol abuse prevention, and nutrition improvement. Stay with the winners, at least at the beginning.

Reap the benefits

Once your staff wellness program is functioning, you will reap benefits in such areas as reduced (or at least contained) health care and insurance costs, increased productivity, and improved staff morale. Admittedly, some of these are hard to measure. Nevetheless, a growing body of research is substantiating these claims.

It is important, however, to maintain reasonable expectations. Wellness efforts are viewed best as cost containment, not cost reduction. Health care costs are rising too rapidly for there to be a reasonable expectation that they can be reversed. Also, do not be discouraged if initial participation is not as high as you had hoped. Unfortunately, wellness requires personal effort beyond the preference of some individuals. But even modest participation rates can produce worthwhile results.

In addition, keep in mind that behavior change is easier to initiate than to maintain. Changing your school system's health culture can be a slow process, but it is worth the effort. Employees who are healthy and fit are more productive; they enjoy life and their work more. Those are beneficial results for employees, students, the school system, and the community. ■

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"But it has to be under staff health," said a third. "That's what it's all about."

The answer depends on the primary goals of your program. Examine your policy to see if it is slanted more toward staff development or toward health, for example. Choose the primary category, but cross reference it to other related categories. Once decided, be sure to add "wellness program" to your *ERS Code Finder Index*. ■